



MyFeedback: an online writing feedback service with students as partners

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Abstract

MyFeedback is an online feedback service run by the academic tutoring team at the University of East London (UEL). The service provides a formative type of feedback on the academic writing of students based on drafts they upload to a digital inbox. The service is a differentiating support mechanism that complements the one-to-one guidance provided by the academic writing tutors. This is possible by training and supervising students (online feedback initiators) to provide reviews of assignment drafts. In this ALDCon24 workshop, we discussed how the development and operation of the service has thrived through a partnership between learning developers and students, and thus establishing a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) of shared learning and vision. We provided insights into the working model and the ways in which students become partners and occasionally co-creators. We highlighted the opportunities and benefits that are shared among all those involved and the roles they assume. Student users of the service engage in a self-regulated learning experience (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) enacted by their repeated exposure to peer feedback interactions that is underpinned by pedagogical principles, such as the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and differentiation, for example in Tomlinson (2001). Tutors and student partners collaborate to consolidate their feedback mechanisms by bringing together teaching expertise, fresh enthusiasm, first-hand student experiences, and a sense of belonging, inclusivity and collaboration. At the same time, tutors direct their capacity efficiently to students who can benefit more from a live dialogue based on their assessment at hand.

Keywords: online feedback; formative feedback; academic writing; student partners.

Session report

At the start of the session, we mentioned University of East London's historical context as a post-1992 institution, having a highly diverse student body with an equal number of home and international students in the 2023-4 academic year. The increased need for support in academic writing as well as constructive and timely feedback led to the creation of MyFeedback to complement both feedback coming from one-to-one sessions with academic writing tutors, as well as other formative feedback practices within academic subject areas.

MyFeedback adds another layer to formative feedback opportunities. The feedback is available on-demand and standardised in the form of quickmarks providing developmental advice. These are pasted on the student draft electronically via Turnitin along with a summary of key areas for development. Since the feedback is individual, MyFeedback allows the academic writing team to scale up its one-to-one advice provision and act as a triage mechanism for learning development. For example, based on the key areas for development identified, a student may be encouraged to get in touch with an academic writing tutor to discuss their work.

Session participants were interested to know how the service compares to other commercial services available. A commercial service providing feedback via an online platform had been used in the past at UEL. After being used for a while, our team at the time made a proposal to replace that offer with our own in-house solution. The team secured initial funding to run a successful pilot and from then on was funded by the Office for Students Access and Participation Plan institutional funding. The high satisfaction rates with the service provide some evidence on whether an in-house service can provide high quality writing feedback. Even if that could be matched by another provider, MyFeedback provides unique benefits, being an integral part of the university community. Those benefits were shared as part of the presentation and were linked back to the relevant question from colleagues in the session.

MyFeedback reviews are peer-based, carried out by paid student interns who are trained and supervised by the Academic Tutoring team. Student users highly appreciate the reviews, with their comments suggesting that they can develop their writing further. The

an online writing feedback service with students as partners interns talk about their participation as a unique opportunity, equipping them with valuable experience. Academic tutors benefit too by leading on and learning from a unique type of partnership between them and student interns as well as projecting the outcomes onto the student community itself. Therefore, MyFeedback is a cross-institutional section of the university community with distinct roles and a common purpose.

Our colleagues in the session mentioned the challenges that Generative AI may pose to a project that provides written feedback advice. Again, we mapped the question back to the value of the indirect relationships created by peers (interns) providing feedback to another peer (student user) and the ability of the student user to seek further support from the team supervising the feedback process that produced the online advice. At the same time, we would be monitoring the situation and examine how the use of Generative AI can lead to the best possible development outcomes for the students, whether used directly by the student or incorporated in some form within the MyFeedback project.

Community response

The engagement from the session participants centred on the innovative approach to student partnership and resource allocation. Recognising the practical and pedagogical value of the initiative, one attendee, Zephra Weber from Oxford Brookes University, reflected:

I was impressed with the way that Ioannis and his team redirected funding used for an external resource into an internal resource that harnessed students as partners. I'd love to start some work with students as partner or peer mentors and it was helpful and motivating seeing one example of how this could look in practice.

This response exemplifies how the session succeeded in not only sharing operational insights but also inspiring potential adaptations at other institutions. Weber's comments highlight two key aspects that resonated with the audience: the strategic reallocation of resources and the scalable model of student partnership. The enthusiasm expressed for implementing similar initiatives suggests that the presentation achieved its goal of demonstrating practical approaches to building student-staff partnerships in academic support services.

Next steps and additional questions

Providing good quality feedback is a big challenge in academia due to the time pressure, so the more scaffolding help this activity receives, the best for the real beneficiaries of feedback: the students.

1. How were participants recruited for this community of practice and was the process efficient?
2. What roles were available within MyFeedback for tutors and for students?
3. Were there many international students participating as co-creators?

Authors' answers

1. Participants were recruited through the University of East London's internship scheme. Interested candidates apply by submitting their CV and cover letter. The recruitment process includes interviews and practice tests, which have proved to be efficient. These steps allowed us to assess the candidates' skills as outlined in their applications and ensure they were well-suited for the role. Furthermore, during the interviews, we evaluated how well candidates would benefit from the upcoming training based on their potential and the will to become excellent providers of feedback for their peers.
2. Student interns are responsible for providing constructive feedback on draft assignments submitted by other UEL students. Meanwhile, academic tutors play a crucial role in supporting the student partners. They are responsible for training the student partners, offering guidance, assessing their ability to provide effective feedback, and assisting in their skills development. Opportunities for knowledge exchange are regular, whether via online means or in meetings, where all share experiences and ideas about the project.
3. International students were included in the team, reflecting UEL's dedication to inclusivity and diversity. Having a diverse and inclusive team offers several benefits, such as enhancing the range of perspectives and ideas, which can lead to more innovative solutions. For example, international students bring unique cultural insights that can improve the relevance and accessibility of the feedback provided.

Authors' reflections

Ioannis Lignos

By co-creating services and processes in partnership with students, we can significantly impact their sense of belonging and inclusion. In this case, MyFeedback operates and thrives from within the university community of staff and students and responds to the needs of both those providing and receiving developmental and timely feedback.

Through sharing this work with the wider learning development community and the appreciative comments we received, we came to realise more vividly how crucial it is to invest our efforts in staff and student partnerships that withstand the test of time. Such initiatives can be well placed to amplify our response to what the students need and allow us to maintain communities of good practice that are built on established pedagogical principles for the long-term.

First piloted in 2017-18, the project continues to serve students alongside our major learning development work (academic skills sessions and one-to-one support). It was a great pleasure to stand next to Oana in this presentation, sharing her perspective as a former student intern and her journey through different stages and roles of the partnership, and thus highlighting the project's lasting impact. Similarly, the academic tutors have contributed their time and expertise to this project such that it remains robust and ready to serve our students year on year.

During the session, we explained how academic tutors are key in integrating pedagogical principles into the project, while student interns offer their fresh perspective on how to best meet student needs. For example, we shared a quote that the project was fundamentally incepted by '...for feedback to be meaningful it needs to follow a developmental pathway, one that directs the receiver of the feedback to a functional outcome' (Abrahamson and Mann, 2018, p.154).

The team continues to commit to solid pedagogy and, together with our new and returning year-on-year student partners, examine what students most need to get out of their feedback review. With the challenges, changes and benefits that Generative AI may bring to learning and/or writing development, it is our immediate aim to examine carefully how Generative AI can be used in our efforts to build communities of learning.

Oana Gherasim

Presenting at the conference was an incredibly rewarding experience that significantly contributed to my professional growth. It provided me with a valuable opportunity to develop my skills, particularly in delivering presentations and engaging with a diverse audience of learning developers. Interacting with fellow professionals in the field allowed me to forge meaningful connections and exchange insights that will undoubtedly enhance my future work.

Reflecting on the feedback I received during the conference has been instrumental in identifying areas for improvement in my approach to helping students with their academic writing. For example, some of the questions we received focused on artificial intelligence (AI) providing feedback to students. It was very motivating to have those questions, as we had already started working on a draft AI guide meant to help students write their assignments without compromising on their learning and realised how crucial this has become for the wider community. Another example that could be mentioned here is how I was inspired to create new promotional materials to show students the benefits of using MyFeedback (videos, PowerPoint presentations).

The MyFeedback system, which has been in operation for six years, continues to evolve and expand, reaching an increasing number of students. The student interns' commitment to improving the project annually and introducing new features to support students highlights the ongoing impact and relevance of the system.

Further reading

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight of this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Zephra Weber from Oxford Brookes University.

Thank you to Jonathan Mann (also cited in our reflections above) for successfully leading on the project and working together with the rest of the team in 2018 in writing and implementing the MyFeedback processes and its pedagogical foundations.

The authors and contributors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Author details

Ioannis Lignos is the Academic Skills Development Manager at the University of East London, leading the academic tutoring team of academic writing and maths specialists. The team were awarded the honorary title of University of East London Teaching Fellows for their collaborative work in embedding academic skills seminars across all faculties hundreds of modules year on year, and thus enhancing student outcomes.

Oana Gherasim is an Academic Tutoring Officer and member of the academic tutoring team at the University of East London. Oana leads the team of student partners working for MyFeedback and supports project operations, while also contributing to teaching and learning activities led by the academic tutors. Oana was recruited as a student intern to work for MyFeedback in its first year of full operation and had been returning to work in the project, before moving onto her current role. Oana is proud to have achieved Fellow of the Higher Education Academy status early in her career due to her involvement in formative assessment and supporting teaching and learning activities.

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